Even though we don’t have proof that freedom quilts existed as a means of communication, the cultural art of sewing brought from Africa speaks to the resilience of the many enslaved people who used their voice as a tool of resistance in the face of unspeakable treatment.

**QUILT PATTERNS & THEIR MEANINGS**

**Monkey Wrench**
This meant the slaves were to gather all the tools they might need on the journey to freedom; tools to build shelters, compasses for determining direction, or tools to serve as weapons for defending themselves.

**Wagon Wheel**
This was the second pattern to be displayed, which signaled the slaves to pack all the things that would go in a wagon or that would be used during their journey. This was a signal for the slaves to think about what essentials they needed to survive the trip.

**Carpenter’s Wheel (Wagon Wheel variation)**
This pattern would have particular significance to slaves skilled in a craft—such as carpentry. (Other such patterns might be: an Anvil, Circular Saw, Square and Compass.) It was also a symbol to “steal away”—a visual equivalent to the popular spiritual “Steal Away”, which many slaves knew and sang. The pattern told slaves to “run with faith” to the west—Northwest Territories.

**Bear’s Paw**
It’s believed that this pattern was sometimes used to help fugitives follow the path of the bear, and to identify landmarks on the edge of the plantation.

**Crossroads**
Once through the mountains, slaves were to travel to the crossroads. The main crossroad was Cleveland, Ohio. Any quilt hung before this one would have given directions to Ohio.

**Log Cabin**
This pattern was used to let the slaves know where safe houses were. People who helped the Underground Railroad may have identified themselves as friends to slaves on the run by tracing this pattern in dirt as a signal. This quilt told slaves to look for this symbol on their journey to freedom. It was also a symbol to set up a “home” in a free state.

**Shoofly**
Little is known about this pattern. It is believed that Shoofly refers to an actual person who might have aided escaping slaves.
**Bow Ties**
Slaves’ clothes were often tattered and easy to spot. This pattern meant that someone would bring the slave nice clothes to help them blend in with the free blacks.

**Flying Geese**
This pattern told the slaves to follow migrating geese north towards Canada and to freedom. This pattern was used as directions as well as the best season for slaves to escape. Geese fly north in the spring and summer. Flying geese pointed to the direction, north, for the slaves to move. Also, geese would have to stop at waterways along their journey in order to rest and eat. Slaves were to take their cues on direction, timing and behavior from the migrating geese.

**Drunkard’s Path**
This was a clear warning for the slaves to move in a staggering fashion so as to elude any following slave hunters. It was suggested that slaves even double back to elude their pursuers.

**North Star (Evening Star/Star)**
This instructed the slaves to follow the North Star to Canada and to freedom.

**Tumbling Blocks (Boxes)**
This signaled to the slaves—by the number of boxes and knots—the time to “box up” all one’s belongings in preparation to escape.